

## Abraham the Proselytizer *Par Excellence* in Jewish Antiquity

David J. Rudolph

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I was reading a book the other day entitled *Shlichus: Meeting the Outreach Challenge: A Resource Handbook for Shluchim*. It is published by Nshei Chabad Publications (1991) and is essentially Lubavitch outreach training manual.

Significantly, at the very beginning of the book there is a reference to the proselytizing<sup>1</sup> Abraham tradition. And it struck me when I saw it that this tradition, which I am introducing today, is still alive among a segment of our people. And notably, it is alive among a sect of ultra-Orthodox Judaism that fervently proselytizes fellow Jews.

In this short paper, I raise three queries: (1) Does the tradition of Abraham the proselytizer go back as far as the first century? (2) What early Rabbinic texts speak of Abraham the proselytizer?; and (3) What can the Messianic Jewish community learn from this tradition?

**Let's consider the first question: Does the tradition of Abraham the proselytizer go back as far as the first century?**

Prof. Martin Goodman of Oxford has written, 'By the third century CE, the patriarch Abraham was described as being so good a proselytizer that he caused God to be known as king of earth as well as heaven, and this prowess in winning proselytes was one of the main features of the career of Abraham singled out for praise in later rabbinic writings. By contrast, it was Abraham's piety as a convert, not a converter, that was stressed by Philo, Josephus, and other writers of earlier periods' (Goodman, *Mission and Conversion*, 89).

While it is correct that first century Jewish literature gives more attention to Abraham the quintessential 'proselyte than Abraham the quintessential 'proselytizer,' this does not mean that the tradition of a proselytizing Abraham was unknown at this time. At least two first-century Jewish sources suggest that this tradition was indeed known

Please turn to the first text on your handout. The *Book of Jubilees*, written between 160-150 BCE (VanderKam 1989:v-vi; 2001:21), tells the story of how Abraham converted to the worship of the 'creator of all' (*Jub.* 11:17) and later attempted to convert<sup>2</sup> his father and brothers to his new beliefs. *Jubilees* 12.1-8 reads:

1 During the sixth week, in its seventh year, Abram said to his father Terah: 'My father'. He said: 'Yes, my son'? 2 He said: 'What help and advantage do we get from these idols before which you worship and prostrate yourself? 3 For there is no spirit in them because they are dumb. They are an error of the mind. *Do not worship them.* 4 *Worship the God of heaven* who makes the rain and dew fall on the earth and makes everything on the earth. He created everything by his word; and all life (comes) from his presence. 5 Why do you worship those

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<sup>1</sup> *Proselytize* [with obj.] means to 'convert or attempt to convert (someone) from one religion, belief, or opinion to another' (*Oxford Dictionary of English*). Notably, the term προσήλυτον is used in Matt 23:15 to refer to Pharisaic proselytizing.

<sup>2</sup> *Convert* [no obj.] means to 'change one's religious faith or other belief.'

things which have no spirit in them? For they are made by hands and you carry them on your shoulders. You receive no help from them, but instead they are a great shame for those who make them and an error of the mind for those who worship them. *Do not worship them*'. 6 Then he said to him: 'I, too, know (this), my son. What shall I do with the people who have ordered me to serve in their presence? 7 If I tell them what is right, they will kill me because they themselves are attached to them so that they worship and praise them. Be quiet, my son, so that they do not kill you'. 8 *When he told these things to his two brothers* and they became angry at him, he remained silent (*Jub.* 12.1-8 [VanderKam 1989, CSCO]; emphasis mine).

The *Jubilees* story reads between the lines of Gen 11:27-32 and attempts to fill in the missing pieces. From Abraham's perspective, idolatry is foolish. Abraham appeals to his father to reject his household religion and embrace monotheism. The call to convert could not be more clear, 'Do not worship them. Worship the God of heaven' (*Jub.* 12:3-4).<sup>3</sup> Terah admits that Abraham is correct but he is afraid to convert. If he tells the people that idols are nothing, they will kill him (*Jub.* 12:6-7). Concerned that his son's apologetic activities will lead to his grave, Terah orders Abraham to be silent (*Jub.* 12:7). But Abraham cannot remain silent when it comes to the one true God. Abraham attempts to convert his brothers to monotheism but they respond with anger (*Jub.* 12:8). The text portrays Abraham as a zealous convert to monotheism who is unsuccessful in his attempts to convert his family.

A second text from this period that portrays Abraham as a proselytizer is Josephus' *Antiquities* 1.161-168. In first-century Jewish literature, there are various legends surrounding Abraham's sojourn into Egypt. Josephus' account, which reads between the lines of Gen 12:10-20, is as follows. Please see TEXT 2 on your handout:

Some time later, Canaan being in the grip of a famine, Abraham, hearing of the prosperity of the Egyptians, was of a mind to visit them, alike to profit by their abundance and to hear what their priests said about the gods; *intending, if he found their doctrine more excellent than his own, to conform to it, or else to convert them to a better mind should his own beliefs prove superior*. He took Sara with him and, fearing the Egyptians' frenzy for women, lest the king should slay him because of his wife's beauty, he devised the following scheme: he pretended to be her brother and, telling her that their interest required it, instructed her to play her part accordingly. On their arrival in Egypt all fell out as Abraham had suspected: his wife's beauty was noised abroad, insomuch that Pharaohes, the king of the Egyptians, not content with the reports of her, was fired with a desire to see her and on the point of laying hands on her. But God thwarted his criminal passion by an outbreak of disease and political disturbance; and when he had sacrifices offered to discover a remedy, the priest declared that his calamity was due to the wrath of God, because he had wished to outrage the stranger's wife. Terrified, he asked Sarra who she was and who was this man she had brought with her. On learning the truth he made his excuses to Abraham: it was, he said, in the belief that she was his sister, not his wife, that he had set his affections on her; he had wished to contract a marriage alliance and not to outrage her in a transport of passion. He further gave him abundant riches, and Abraham consorted with the most learned of the Egyptians, whence his virtue and reputation became still more conspicuous. For, seeing that the Egyptians were addicted to a variety of different customs and disparaged one another's practices and were consequently at enmity with one another, *Abraham conferred with each party and, exposing the arguments which they adduced*

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<sup>3</sup> 'In 12:1ff. he tries to convert Terah' (Knox 1935:57). Abraham's statement in *Jub.* 12:3-4 is proselytic even by Goodman's (1994a:3-6) minimalist definition.

*in favour of their particular views, demonstrated that they were idle and contained nothing true. Thus gaining their admiration at these meetings as a man of extreme sagacity, gifted not only with high intelligence but with power to convince his hearers on any subject which he undertook to teach, he introduced them to arithmetic and transmitted to them the laws of astronomy.* For before the coming of Abraham the Egyptians were ignorant of these sciences, which thus traveled from the Chaldaeans into Egypt, whence they passed to the Greeks (Josephus, *Ant.* 1.161-168 [Thackeray, LCL]; emphasis mine).

The famine is an opportunity for Abraham to travel to Egypt in order to debate matters of religious truth (*Ant.* 1.161).<sup>4</sup> Abraham is here depicted as a missionary-apologist who converts the Egyptians, through dialogue and persuasion, to his own beliefs. Such proselytizing activity comes as no surprise to the reader, for only six verses earlier Josephus comments that Abraham ‘began to have more lofty conceptions of virtue than the rest of mankind, and determined to reform and change [καινίσαι καὶ μεταβαλεῖν] the ideas universally current concerning God. He was thus the first boldly to declare that God, the creator of the universe, is one’ (*Ant.* 1.155 [Thackeray, LCL]).<sup>5</sup> The thematic link between the two passages is further emphasized by the joint description of Abraham as exceptionally *persuasive* to his listeners (*Ant.* 1.154, 167). Louis Feldman notes how this image of Abraham in *Ant.* 1.161-168 differs from early rabbinic literature:

The rabbis, like Josephus, speak of Abraham as a missionary, but in the rabbinic writings about him there is no philosophical setting in the Hellenistic style of real debate, including a willingness to be converted if defeated in argument; instead, the picture is of a dogmatic missionary proceeding systematically to win converts. Josephus, sensitive to the charge that the Jews are aggressive missionaries, is careful to modify this picture (Feldman 1993:134-35).<sup>6</sup>

Like a Hellenistic wise man, Josephus’ Abraham is broad-minded and willing to worship the Egyptian gods if it can be demonstrated that their beliefs are ‘more excellent than his own.’<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, he will ‘convert’ (μετακοσμήσειν) the Egyptians to the worship of the Lord ‘if his own beliefs prove superior’ (*Ant.* 1.161). What happens in the end? It is *implied* that Abraham converts the Egyptians. Negatively stated, ‘Abraham conferred with each party and, exposing the arguments which they adduced in favour of their particular views, demonstrated that they were idle and contained nothing true’ (*Ant.* 1.166). Positively stated, Josephus asserts that Abraham had the ‘power to convince his hearers on any subject which he undertook to teach’ (*Ant.* 1.167). Since Abraham went down to Egypt expressly intending to convert the Egyptians to monotheism or be converted (*Ant.* 1.161), Josephus here *implies* that

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* 1.26; 3.16; 6:10; Josephus, *Apion* 1.176-182.

<sup>5</sup> Feldman (2000:56) translates: ‘he determined to innovate and change the conception concerning God that everyone happened to have.’ Cf. Spilsbury 1998:58.

<sup>6</sup> See Shinan (1983) for early Rabbinic interpretations of Gen 12:10-20.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Philodemus, *Volumina Rhetorica* 2.146 (Sudhaus). Feldman insightfully notes that ‘Jews in Hellenistic times were sometimes accused of being provincial and narrow-minded—above all, by such leading Stoics as Poseidonius and Apollonius Molon (*ap.* Josephus, *Apion* 2.79, 145-50). These Stoics may have seen the Jews as often successful rivals to their own missionary efforts. Cf. Horace, *Sat.* 1.4.142-43; Juvenal 14.96-106; Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.1; Feldman (1993a:288-341)’ (Feldman 2000:60-61).

Abraham won the disputation and converted his hearers' religious convictions through powerful and compelling arguments.<sup>8</sup>

Yoshiko Reed (2002:11) arrives at the same position, 'From *Ant.* 1.166-67, it seems that the latter [conversion] is precisely what happened; after all, Abraham convinced the Egyptians through rational argument that their ideas "lacked substance and contained nothing true."' Similarly Nancy Calvert (1993:151) notes, 'One would conclude that one of the subjects in which Abraham was convincing was his doctrine of monotheism.'

By contrast, Goodman (1994a:89) argues that 'what he taught was not, it seems, Judaism or even monotheism or anything like it. The burden of his teaching emerges unexpectedly as arithmetic and astronomy.' Goodman's admission that arithmetic and astronomy are introduced 'unexpectedly' suggests that something else was expected. What was it? Beginning with *Ant.* 1.155, 161, Josephus focuses on 'what their priests said about the gods' and Abraham's plan to 'reform and change the ideas universally current concerning God.' Goodman does not interact with this central missionary-apologetic theme of the text.

But why does Josephus not make this *explicit*? We may offer two reasons. First, Josephus is writing to a primarily Gentile/Roman audience at the end of the first century (c. 93/94 CE). It would have been politically risky for him to emphasize Abraham's success in proselytizing given the history of Jewish expulsions from Rome due to purported Jewish missionary-apologetic activity. Feldman stresses this point:

Significantly, Josephus does not portray Abram as teaching the Egyptians about his monotheism, presumably because this would expose Josephus to the charge of seeking to proselytize—a charge about that the Romans were particularly sensitive, as we see from the expulsions of the Jews from Rome for attempting missionary activities in 139 B.C.E., in 19 C.E., and during the reign of Claudius. See Feldman (1993a:300-304).<sup>9</sup>

Second, Shaye Cohen argues convincingly that Josephus' subtlety on the conversion issue in *Antiquities* is a response to the anti-Jewish polemic of writers like Tacitus and Juvenal, who regarded contemporary Jewish proselytism as a threat to the Roman state (Cohen 1987:428-29).

The historical analysis by Feldman and Cohen offers a reasonable explanation for why Josephus unexpectedly concludes *Antiquities* 1.161-168 with the claim that Abraham introduced the Egyptians to mathematics and astronomy rather than monotheistic religion.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See also Goodman (1994b:75).

<sup>9</sup> Also Feldman 2000:63-64. Reed (2002:13) concurs, 'Moreover, it is likely that Josephus here (as elsewhere in the *Antiquities*) refrains from making any explicit statement about proselytism or conversion, due to his sensitivity to "pagan" critiques of the purported Jewish zeal for proselytizing, particularly in the wake of the expulsion of Jews from Rome in 139 BCE and possibly 19 CE.' See Smallwood (1956:314-29) who argues that the expulsions from Rome were a response to actual or perceived Jewish missionary-apologetic activity. Also Schäfer 1997:109-11; Dickson 2003:24-31; Carleton-Paget 1996:73-74, 87-90; Stern 1980:68-73; Matthews 2001:11-14. 'Josephus therefore had to be extremely careful not to offend his Roman hosts...Indeed, his aim in the *Antiquities* is to follow in the footsteps of Ptolemy Philadelphus in seeking to make the Bible better known and consequently to gain respect for the Jews, rather than to convert the pagans' (Feldman 1998:159).

<sup>10</sup> This is not to suggest that propagation of mathematics-astronomy and monotheism were mutually exclusive for Josephus. On the contrary, he likely regarded the former as a testimony of the latter. Reed (2003:13-14) notes, 'Furthermore, the nature and scope of philosophy in Josephus' time may not support a strict division between the theological/philosophical ideas that he attributes to Abraham and the "scientific" ones. Indeed, when Josephus

Mathematics and astronomy were highly valued areas of study in the Greco-Roman world, and Josephus' readers would have grown in their respect for Jews upon learning that Abraham introduced this advanced knowledge to the Egyptians long before it came to the Greeks. If Josephus had concluded the section on the note of Jewish missionary-apologetic success, it would have had the opposite effect.

Finally, it is significant that Josephus leads into Abraham's proselytizing in Egypt (*Ant.* 1.161-168) with reference to 'those who had increased in numbers from him [Abraham]' (ὁ ἅπ' ἐκείνου πληθύσαντες) (*Ant.* 1.160), an allusion to Gen 12:5.<sup>11</sup> As we will see in the next section, Gen 12:5 was the central biblical passage used by the Targums and the early Rabbis to refer to Abraham's proselytizing work.<sup>12</sup> To this we now turn. Please see Text No. 3.

#### Abraham's Apologetic Work in Haran (Gen 12:5) According to Post-70 C.E. Jewish Literature

Gen 12:5 states that Abraham set out for Canaan with Sarah, their property and an untold number of people from Haran:

Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, *and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran* (MT: וְאֵת־הַנְּפֹשׁ אֲשֶׁר־עָשׂוּ בְּחָרָן); and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan (Gen 12:5).

Samson Raphael Hirsch translates the phrase וְאֵת־הַנְּפֹשׁ אֲשֶׁר־עָשׂוּ בְּחָרָן: 'and the souls whom they had *made* in Haran.'<sup>13</sup> Did first-century Jews interpret Gen 12:5 as a reference to Abram and Sara making souls in the sense that they won souls to the Lord through their proselytizing efforts? Three considerations make this plausible. First, the meaning of the passage is not clear. First-century Jews would have had to consider various possible meanings of the text, one of which was that Abram and Sara were proselytizers. Second, the passage is between Gen 11:27-32 and 12:10-20, the two texts out of which stories of Abraham's

explicitly attributes to Abraham the transmission of astronomical and mathematical knowledge to the Egyptians, the reader already knows that Abraham's understanding of the celestial cycles is unique; it has been shaped by a new view of the relationship between the cosmos and divinity, based on his recognition of a single Creator, from whom the celestial bodies gain the only measure of order and power that they possess. Even in the most positive treatment of astronomy/astrology in *Antiquities'* account of Abraham (i.e., *Ant.* 1.167-168), Josephus may thus subordinate the patriarch's involvement with this discipline to the monotheism discovered by him and faithfully cultivated by the nation that came forth from him.' Why did Josephus introduce the topic of religious disputation and conversion into the narrative at all? A reasonable explanation is that Josephus was aware of a Jewish tradition that depicted Abraham as a missionary-apologist in Egypt. He felt the need to include it but was concerned about its reception due to Roman polemic against Jewish proselytizing activity. He thus Hellenized the missionary-apologetic theme and kept it out of the conclusion of the story to make it more acceptable to his audience.

<sup>11</sup> See Feldman 2000:59. In *Ant.* 1.160-161, Josephus skips any discussion of Gen 12:6-9, adding to the likelihood of a thematic relationship between Gen 12:5 and 12:10.

<sup>12</sup> 'The reference to "those who increased in numbers from him" presumably represents Gen 12:5: "Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot...*and the souls that they acquired in Haran* (MT: וְאֵת־הַנְּפֹשׁ אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ בְּחָרָן; LXX: καὶ πᾶσαν ψυχὴν ἣν ἐκτήσαντο ἐν Χαρραν), and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan.'" It proves interesting that Josephus here chooses to represent this difficult verse at all, inasmuch as Rabbinic traditions preserve its use as a proof-text for Abraham's success at proselytizing (Tg<sup>Onq</sup> *ad* Gen 12:5; BerR 39:14)' (Reed 2000:9).

<sup>13</sup> Samson Raphael Hirsch (trans.), *The Pentateuch* (New York: The Judaica Press, 1986), 62.

legendary proselytizing arose (as we saw in *Jubilees* 12.1-8 and *Antiquities* 1.161-68). Is this a coincidence? Or were these legendary accounts prompted by a proselytizing interpretation of Gen 12:5? A third and weighty consideration is that Jews in the early second century interpreted Gen 12:5 אֶת־הַנְּפֹשׁ אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂו בְּחָרָן as a reference to Abraham's proselytizing efforts. These three considerations make it likely that Gen 12:5 was interpreted by late first-century Jews as a reference to Abram's proselytizing activities in Haran.

**This brings us to our second question: What early Rabbinic texts speak of Abraham the proselytizer?**

Please turn to Texts 4-8. Notably, on the basis of Gen 12:5, all of the Genesis Targums (including Onqelos, which Martin McNamara and Robert Hayward date to the period between the First and Second Revolts [66-132 C.E.] in final form)<sup>14</sup> describe Abraham as a missionary-apologist in Haran who made converts:<sup>15</sup>

Tg. Onq. 12:5 And Abram took his wife Sarai, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions which they had acquired, *and the persons whom they had subjected to the Law* in Haran (וְיֵת נַפְשֵׁתָא דְשַׁעֲבִידוּ לְאֹרִיתָא בְּחָרָן).<sup>16</sup>

Tg. Neof. 12:5 And Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot, his brother's son, and all their wealth which they had acquired and the souls *they had converted* (וְיֵת נַפְשֵׁתָא דִּי גִיִּירוּ).<sup>17</sup>

Tg. Ps.-J 12:5 Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all the possessions which they had acquired, and all the persons whom they had *converted* in Haran (וְיֵת נַפְשֵׁתָא דִּי גִיִּירוּ בְּחָרָן).<sup>18</sup>

Frg. Tg. P 12:5 And the persons that they had proselytized (וְיֵת הַנְּפֹשׁ : וְיֵת נַפְשָׁא דְגִיִּירוּן).<sup>19</sup>

Frg. Tg. V 12:5 And the persons whom they had proselytized (וְיֵת הַנְּפֹשׁ : וְיֵת נַפְשֵׁתָא דְגִיִּירוּן).<sup>20</sup>

Please look at Text 9 on your handout. The Targums aside, *Sifre Deuteronomy* 32.2 is the earliest Rabbinic text that expands on the Gen 12:5 tradition of Abraham proselytizing in

<sup>14</sup> McNamara 2001:306; Hayward 1998:31 n. 20; cf. Grossfeld 1988:33; 1994:245. Contra Drazin 1999:257.

<sup>15</sup> For a survey of proselytizing Abraham tradition in Jewish literature, see Goodman 1989:175-85; Bamberger 1939:175-77; Schein 1973:40-51. See Hayward 1998:25-37; Delcor 1970:105-119; Ohana 1974:317-32. The presence of the missionary-apologist Abraham tradition in *Tg. Onq.* 12:5 but not 21:33, and the weak exegetical basis for it in Gen 21:33 (with most Targums reading וַיִּקְרָא as a *hiph'il* rather than *qal*), suggests to me that the *Tg. Neof./Ps. J.* 21:33 expansion was probably a later development based on the exegetically defensible *Tg. Gen* 12:5 tradition, a view argued by Levy 1986:161.

<sup>16</sup> Grossfeld 1988:63. Cf. Aberbach and Grossfeld 1982:78. Also Sperber 1959:17.

<sup>17</sup> McNamara 1992:86; Macho 1968:63. Also Grossfeld 2000:128.

<sup>18</sup> Maher 1992:52; Ginsburger 1903:20.

<sup>19</sup> Klein 1980:I:49; II:11.

<sup>20</sup> Klein 1980:I:132; II:96.

Haran. Stemberger (1996:273) dates the final redaction to the late third century.<sup>21</sup> The text reads:

‘The soul that they had made in Haran’ (Gen. 12:5). Now is it not the case that if everyone in the world got together to create a single gnat and to bring into it the breath of life, they could never do so? But the sense is that our father, Abraham, made converts and *brought them under the wings of God’s presence* (*SifreDeut* 32.2; trans. Neusner 1997a:57).

This exegetical midrash focuses on the Hebrew **וְאֶת־הַנְּפֹשׁ אֲשֶׁר־עָשׂוּ בְּחָרָן** (Gen 12:5) and raises the question: How could Abraham ‘make’ (עָשׂוּ) a soul? It would have been impossible for Abraham to literally make a soul. What then is the meaning of the text? *SifreDeut* concludes that ‘our father Abraham *made converts*.’ ‘Under the wings of God’s presence’ is a reference to proselytes coming under the wings of the Shekhinah (Goodman 1994:145). It is probably an allusion to Boaz’s words to Ruth in Ruth 2:12, ‘May the LORD reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the LORD, the God of Israel, *under whose wings you have come for refuge!*’ (אֲשֶׁר־בָּאתָ לְחֹסוֹת תַּחַת־כְּנָפָיו).

*Genesis Rabbah* further expands the tradition. Stemberger (1996:279) dates the final redaction to the first half of the fifth century. Please see Text 10 on your handout. *GenRab* 39.14 reads:

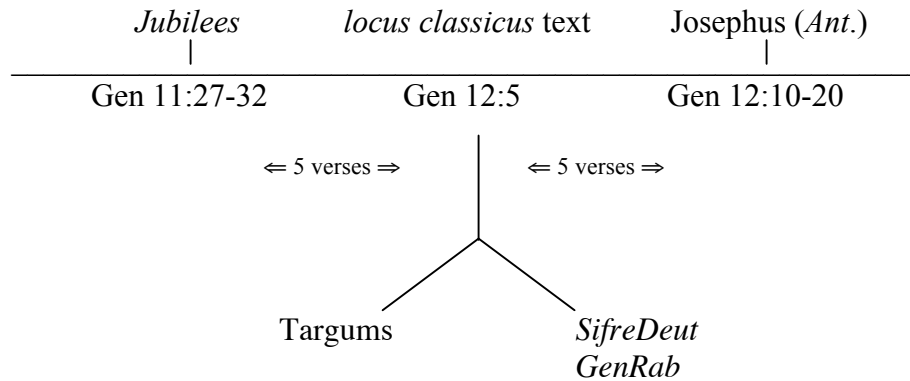
‘And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother’s son, and all their possessions which they had gathered, and the soul that they had made...’ (Gen. 12:5): R. Eleazar in the name of R. Yosé b. Zimra: ‘If all of the nations of the world should come together to try to create a single mosquito, they could not put a soul into it, and yet you say, “And the soul that they had made”? [they could not have created souls.] But this refers to proselytes.’ They why should not the text say, ‘The proselytes whom they had converted.’ Why stress, ‘whom they had made’? This serves to teach you that whoever brings a gentile close [to the worship of the true God] is as if he had created him anew. And why not say, ‘That he had made’? Why, ‘That they had made’? Said R. Huniah, ‘Abraham converted the men and Sarah the women’ (*GenRab* 39.14; trans. Neusner 1997b:145).

The Midrash expands on the tradition of *Sifre Deuteronomy* 32.2 by asking why the ambiguous language ‘they made a soul’ is used? The answer given is that the Hebrew deliberately emphasizes that conversion is a new creation experience. To be *made* is to be created anew. The third person verb עָשׂוּ (‘they made’) is also taken up. Why is it plural? It is explained that Sara was involved in the proselytizing. Abraham converted the men and Sara converted the women.

To sum up the proselytizing Abraham tradition (rooted in Gen 12:5), please look at the diagram below Text 10. It appears that we are looking at a single tradition that had its origins in the late Second Temple period and was passed down to subsequent generations of Jews in the post-70 C.E. period.

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<sup>21</sup> Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; trans. and ed. Markus Bockmuehl; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996).



The Abraham proselytizing tradition also appears in later Rabbinic literature in midrashic exegetical interpretations of Gen 21:33. Here the Masoretic text informs us that ‘Abraham planted a tamarisk tree (אֶשְׁל) in Beer-sheba, and called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God’ (וַיִּקְרָא שָׁם בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי עוֹלָם). Some of the early rabbis interpreted the word אֶשְׁל, which occurs only in the Torah, and twice elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures (1 Sam 22:6; 21:13), as a reference to an orchard or garden. Abraham would feed his guests to their hearts’ delight from his אֶשְׁל. When they were finished eating, they would thank Abraham and this would provide an opportunity for Abraham to proselytize them by teaching them to thank the Lord. Please turn to texts 11 and 12:

### Texts 11-12

And Abraham planted an orchard in Beersheba and within it gave food to the passersby. And it came about that while eating and drinking they would seek to give him the price of what they had eaten and drunk and he would say to them: ‘You are eating from him who said and the world was.’ And they would not move from there until he would convert them, and would teach them to give praise to the Lord of the world. And he worshiped and prayed in the name of the Memra [Word] of the Lord, God of the world (*Tg. Neof.* 21:33; McNamara 1992:115-16).<sup>22</sup>

[Abraham] planted an orchard at ‘The Well-of-the-Seven-Ewe-Lambs,’ and in it he prepared food and drink for those who went and came. And he used to proclaim to them there, ‘Give thanks, and believe in the name of the Memra [Word]<sup>23</sup> of the Lord, the God of the world’ (*Tg. Ps.-J* 21:33; Maher 1992:77).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Tg. Nfmg* and *Frg. Tgs. P, V, N, L* on Gen 21:33. *Frg. Tg. P* uniquely describes Abraham as preaching to the ‘uncircumcised’ (לְעֵרְלִיָּא) until he ‘made proselytes of them.’

<sup>23</sup> *Memra* is Aramaic for ‘word’ (Jastrow), from *meimar*, related to the Hebrew *ma’amar*, from ‘amar: ‘to speak, command.’ It first occurs in *Tg. Onq.* Gen 3:8 (‘And they [Adam and Eve] heard the sound of the *Memra* of the Lord passing through the Garden (of Eden)’). McNamara (*The Aramaic Bible*, 37-38) suggests that the ‘*Memra* (of the Lord)’ is ‘the designation for God most characteristic of all the Targums,’ and that ‘In general...*Memra* is used as a buffer word, introduced apparently for some theological purpose, such as to avoid anthropomorphisms, to avoid making God the direct object or subject of actions connected with creation.’



The Babylonian Talmud (which was redacted in the fifth through seventh century) draws from the proselytizing Abraham tradition and further expands on it. It raises the possibility of translating *eshel* as ‘inn’ rather than ‘orchard.’ It also introduces the *hiphil* stem<sup>24</sup> interpretation of **וַיִּקְרָא** in Gen 21:33 (thus giving it a causative sense – ‘and he caused [people] to call on the name of the Lord’). Please turn to text 13:

### Text 13

‘And he planted a tamarisk tree in Beer Sheba’ (Gen 21:33): Said R. Simeon b. Laqish, ‘This teaches that he prepared an orchard and planted in it every sort of desirable tree.’ R. Judah and R. Nehemiah – One said, ‘It was an orchard.’ The other said, ‘It was an inn.’ From the viewpoint of him who said, ‘It was an orchard,’ that is in line with the language of the verse, ‘He planted.’ But in the view of the one who said that it was an inn, what is the meaning of, ‘He planted’? It is in accord with the usage in the following verse: ‘And he shall plant the tents of his palace’ (Dan. 11:45). ‘And he called there on the name of the Lord, the everlasting God’ (Gen. 21:33): Said R. Simeon b. Laqish, ‘Do not read, “He called [Qal: *vayikra*],” but rather, “He caused [another] to call [Hiphil: *vayakriy*].’ ‘This teaches that Abraham, our father, put the name of the Holy One, blessed be he, into the mouth of everyone who passed by. ‘How so?’ After they had eaten and drunk, they arose to say a blessing [to Abraham, by way of thanking him]. ‘He said to them, “Now did you eat what was mine? You ate what belongs to the God of the world.” They gave thanks and praise and blessed Him who spoke and brought the world into being’ (*b. Soṭah* 10a-b; trans. Neusner 1984:80-81).<sup>25</sup>

The last text we will examine today is *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*. Here the tradition expands so that Abraham is portrayed as actively going out and searching the world for potential converts. Upon finding them, he brings them into his home and offers them his magnanimous hospitality. He was also very creative and envisioned a way to proselytize even when he was not present. He built houses or hostels where food was left for the traveler so that the traveler might eat and be satisfied and express gratitude to the God of heaven. Please look at Text 14:

### Text 14

[Abraham] would go forth and search the world, and when he would find wayfarers, he would bring them into his home. The one who was not used to eating wheat bread he fed wheat bread, the one not used to eating meat he fed meat, to the one not used to drinking wine he gave wine to drink. Not only so, but he went and built way stations on the road and left there food and

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<sup>24</sup> *Vaiyakriy. Pathach, hireq-yod.*

<sup>25</sup> The Schottenstein Talmud comments on this text, ‘[The Midrash adds another detail of Abraham’s motivational strategy: If the passersby resisted blessing God, Abraham would present them with a bill for their food and drink – at prices befitting an inn in the middle of the desert. At that point, the visitors would exercise their option of making a blessing rather than paying for their meal (*Tos. Shantz*). Abraham apparently felt that even this insincere blessing would eventually lead them to more sincere appreciation of God’

drink, so that whoever came and entered could eat and drink, and then say a blessing to Heaven. Therefore he got satisfaction, and whatever anyone could ask was found in Abraham's home. For it is said, And Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beer Sheba (Gen. 21:33) (*Abot R. Nat.* 7.1-2; trans. Neusner 1997c:52).

This brings us to our third and final question: (3) What can the Messianic Jewish community learn from this tradition of Abraham the proselytizer? I would like to suggest two ways that we can learn from this tradition:

1. The tradition of Abraham the proselytizer reminds us that *kiruv* (outreach) to Jews and Gentiles has precedent in Jewish antiquity, including Rabbinic Judaism. It is in the Talmud itself. This should embolden our commitment to reach out as a Jewish movement.
2. The tradition of Abraham the proselytizer provides us with a powerful Jewish outreach model. In what ways?

a) The tradition reminds us that there are different ways to reach out. One tradition based on Gen 18 describes Abraham as a more *passive* proselytizer who sits at the entrance of his tent and waits for visitors to come near to him. He then runs to them and extends his hospitality to them. Of course, Abraham was 100 years old and had recently been circumcised and it was a very hot day, which may have accounted for some of his passivity.

The other tradition is described in *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*. Here, Abraham is a more *active* proselytizer who goes forth and searches the world for wayfarers, or travelers, that he can invite into his home in order to feed and proselytize them. The tradition reminds us that we should encourage both passive and active forms of outreach. And by the way, active does not have to mean 'in your face, confrontational evangelism.' We should think of points on a spectrum rather than polarities. We should be creative, as Abraham was, according to the tradition.

b) The tradition reminds us that hospitality is a powerful and Jewish way of reaching out. This is because eating together results in talking together, entering into the life of the other. This is how Yeshua reached out to Jewish tax collectors and sinners. This is how Paul reached out to ordinary Jews, strict Jews and Gentiles throughout the Roman empire. This is how Chabad-Lubavitch reaches out to Jews today. Have you noticed that their center of outreach is not a synagogue but the Chabad House where they emphasize what they call '*kiruv livivot*' (outreach through meals)? The Messianic Jewish community needs to learn from Scripture, tradition and Chabad. We need to rise to the occasion and become a movement known for its hospitality toward Jews and Gentiles, both in the home and in the synagogue. The midrashic tradition of a proselytizing Abraham who caused people to call on the name of the Lord through his eating with them is a vivid and inspiring model that can transform the way we do outreach as a movement.

Thank you.

